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Can Medea Speak? Tracing Euripides' Medea's Complex Performative Gendering in Her Speech from the Outside in the Outside

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Abstract

The complexity of Medea's gendering has become one of the most widely explored topics, particularly in the field of ancient Greek literature within the context of gender. Given that Medea's character is also known to be highly verbal and behaving beyond the general norms of the feminine in the ancient Greek context, this paper proposes to explore Medea's act of speaking and its influence on her gender signification. The notion of Medea's speech "from the Outside in the Outside" defines Medea's act of speaking in the public space of the *polis* that is normally marked as the masculine space, as an abject. In other words, Medea's subjectivation and gendering can also be considered to be constituted through her speaking in the masculine space as a marginalised subject. My reading of Medea's gendering in the context of her act of speaking appropriates the gender performative framework, which is useful to gauge how Euripides' text operates by way of reiteration and repetition of the norms, constraints and failure of repetition of signs of the normative, and the presence of power relation in terms of how the text appears to regulate the performative significations of Medea's gendering in the context of her act of speaking. This paper makes reference mainly to Euripides' text because it is one of the most popular existing versions. On the whole, this study aspires to further expand the exploration of Medea's gendering within the performative context.

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1. Introduction

The complexity of Medea's character has been widely accepted and to date has become in itself a normative. Amongst the many factors that contribute to this complexity is her gendering that has generated extensive scholarly literature. In general, past studies argue various issues regarding the subjection of Medea's gendering as tenuous—neither stable as a masculine nor feminine; essays that premise on the idea that gender is fixed to the body's given sex—a female is associated with the feminine gender and a male with masculine respectively. One cannot exclude from the above that Medea's gesture of speaking also further demonstrates the vicissitudes of her gendering. Indeed, the ancient Greek normative situates the feminine as silent subjects (Podlecki, p.63, n.1084), hence, reserving the act of speaking exclusively to the masculine. However, Medea, like so many other ancient Greek feminine characters, overtly speaks in the public space; a space that is not only reserved for the masculine but also constitutes the masculine act of speaking amongst other normative masculine gestures. This portrayal of Medea as a speaking subject can be seen as an example of the feminine contesting the ancient Greek gender norms and, consequently, implying the failure of the rearticulation of the normative. Conversely, it may also be possible to suggest that Medea retains her femininity while appropriating the masculine code of behaviour of the ancient Greeks. At this point, given the problem concerning Medea's act of speaking, I propose to study Medea's speaking gesture and its relation to her complex gendering. I also appropriate Judith Butler's performative theory to interpret the textual articulation of Medea's various speaking gestures in Euripides' text and to critically reflect on the reflexivity of Medea's act of speaking in relation to her gendering. Besides, my arguments are premised on the normative assumption regarding the bifurcation of gender as either the somatic being feminine or masculine and, consequently, to also demonstrate the tenuousness of the normative formulation of gender itself.

2. The complexity of Medea's gendering

It tends to be the case that the character of Medea is known to act against the behavioural norms that are expected of women in ancient Greece. Emma Griffiths posits that Medea's abnormal behaviour is due to her unfeminine and ambivalent actions (62) while Carole E. Newlands and Sarah Iles Johnston suggest that Medea's actions reflect her challenge towards gender stereotypes (Newlands, 1997, pp.81,195; Johnston, 1997, p.15). In the article "The Metamorphosis of Ovid's Medea," Newlands explains that Medea's act of contesting gender stereotypes is the result of her submission to passion; suggesting that Medea's action against the norms is "driven by passion" or her emotions instead of reason (181). Furthermore, Johnston extends Griffiths' and Newlands' argument above to posit that Medea's actions also reflect her contesting and undermining the "boundary between male and female"; the binary construct of gender (15). Essentially, these studies that assert Medea's acts of challenging gender norms suggest that her own gender is not clearly defined to begin with. Therefore, it can be inferred that Medea's gender ambivalence reflects her character as not conforming or fixed to either the feminine or masculine gender.

To date, there are several studies that posit varying interpretations regarding the ambivalent nature of Medea's gender. For example, Griffiths' study conceives Medea's gender as "a figure who displays male and female characteristics" and, subsequently, claims that the poet Euripides, whose tragedy *Medea* is a popular textual source, favours the portrayal of gender ambivalence, for example, "masculine/feminine dichotomy" in his main characters (68). Nita Krevans recognises this dichotomy in her article "Medea as Foundation-Heroine" and in turn attributes Medea's gender ambivalence to the indeterminate nature of her character and actions (81). In this regard, Krevans illustrates Medea's indeterminate character in the context of her role reversals in stories of the founding of land, where she establishes and names a land instead of the males. Based on this, Krevans then questions Medea's gender: "Is she in fact a heroine—or is she a hero?" (81).

The ambivalence of Medea's gender that the above studies attest to, allows me to justify reading Medea's female sex as portraying a gender that is beyond the feminine gender, which also means that she can be considered as signifying either as a masculine or even both the feminine and masculine simultaneously. On the whole, the arguments above illustrate Medea's gender as complex and tenuous and, therefore, imply an inadvertent influence on the relationship between her gender subjectivity and its context of her gesture of speaking.

3. Defining the act of speaking

There are two main questions that this study addresses. Firstly, does Medea speak in Euripides' tragedy? And secondly, is her gesture of speaking recognised, made intelligible, being privileged or undermined by the masculine and the feminine? Past studies that have established Medea's feminine gendering as tenuous can, consequently, be considered to raise the question of whether Medea's act of speaking in the text defines Medea as a speaking feminine or masculine. Given that this study also alludes to questioning gender cultural norms, as a result, I also question the fixity of gender to sex by way of arguing in my analysis on the cultural assumption of Medea's given female sex as fixed to the feminine gender in the context of Medea's speaking gesture. At this point it warrants brief consideration that my definition of the gesture of speaking constitutes the act of verbally expressing oneself, thus, vocal signs emanating from the mouth. In addition, I also demarcate the notion of speaking as vocal gestures that are signified within the text of the narrative. In other words, I only read Medea's speaking gesture within the world constituted by the narrative of Euripides' tragedy and not considering the idea of the actor that speaks on the stage within the context of the tragic theatre. This argument alludes to J.L.Austin's assertion that the performative utterance as speaking gesture by actors on the stage is marked as "not serious", hence, "parasitic" (22). Although Derrida asserts that the nomination of this "parasitic" gesture can be included as part of a continuous chains of varying degrees of successful performative utterance or "iterable marks" (326), however, I isolate my study to the gesture of speaking in the text itself and not the gesture of speaking in the theatrical context in order to establish my analytical focus.

This study also focuses on Medea's gesture of speaking only within Euripides' text, in particular to A.J. Podlecki's English translation. This is because Euripides' version is the most popular tragedy of Medea, hence, most likely propagated to a wider audience; a version itself a normative in the culture of Medea's myth (Griffiths, 2006, p.71). In addition, Podlecki's translation is recommended for serious studies on ancient Greek women (Hausdoerffer, 2009, n.1). The use of the English version instead of the Greek, the myth's original language, is because the original Euripides' Greek text no longer exists, and that existing Greek copies of the tragedy are themselves transcriptions of copies of copies (Robertson, 2009, p.xxi), therefore, the Podlecki's translation that I am referring to is sufficient to provide the narrative information and context of Medea's myth.

4. Performativity of speaking gesture and gender subjectivation

To date, given the various existing theories on gender, for example, Simone de Beauvoir's formulation and enforcement of the idea of women as an Other in *The Second Sex*, Luce Irigaray's renouncing the feminine as a marked body in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, and Julia Kristeva's argument regarding the symbol of the woman as an abject within the notion of language in *Revolution In Poetic Language*, amongst others, I propose to appropriate Judith Butler's gender performative theory to analyse and interpret the varying signs of Medea's act of speaking in Euripides' text in order to address the influence of Medea's act of speaking on her gendering. Butler's performative theory can be construed as the most viable theoretical framework based on its formulation. To illustrate, one of Butler's main arguments regarding gender performativity is that gender is a surface signification that in turn constitutes corporeal acts or gestures (185, 192). Subsequently, Butler also argues that these bodily acts include speech (xxvii). Therefore, the body's gendering can be inferred as linked to the act of speaking. Furthermore, based on the reasoning that the performative also implicates body gestures as reiterating socially established gender normative (Butler, 1990, p.191), which in turn regulates the intelligibility of either masculinity or femininity of the subject, hence, the act of speaking as a body gesture can be considered as not only relating to but also constrains the body's gendering.

How can the performative be appropriated in my analysis and interpretation of Medea's act of speaking? Given that one of the core factors of the performative concept is its premise on gender and its related gesturing as inextricably linked to the rearticulation of the normative, therefore, my reading of signs of Medea's speaking gesture includes identifying the reiteration of the ancient Greek cultural normative, in particular the culture of masculine as speaking subjects whereas the feminine marked as "passive and silent" (Clauss and Johnston, 1997, p.205). Podlecki attests to this in his assertion that "women, in ancient Greece, were supposed to be seen—sometimes—but almost never heard," thus, enforcing the idea that the act of speaking is a normal code of behaviour for the masculine and

not a normative gesture amongst the women in ancient Greek culture (Podlecki, 1989, p.63, n.1084). Consequently, the appropriation of the performative in my study addresses the question of Medea's speech as either rearticulating the feminine normative of remaining unintelligible or the masculine normative of being recognised. The performative also asserts that gender signification constitutes failure of the rearticulation of gender norms (Butler, 1990, pp.190, 192). This idea of failure can also be seen as implying variances within the rearticulation of the normative. In fact, Butler associates this notion of variance with "the inadvertent re-emergence of the repressed" (Butler, p.39). Therefore, based on the formulation of the performative as constituting the notion of failure in the rearticulation of the normative, the approach of my study of Medea's gesture of speaking includes the examination of the failures by way of identifying variances in the repetition of the normative.

5. Medea and the act of speaking

To date there are only a few studies that relate Medea's act of speaking to her gender subjectivation. These studies include, in particular Melissa Mueller's associating Medea with a masculine in her statement "she [Medea] speaks as if man to man" (471), which also concurs with Carole E. Newlands' argument that associates Medea's speaking gesture with "female power" (206). As such, it can be construed that both Mueller and Newlands suggest that Medea's act of speaking privileges her gender subjection; Medea's gendering as either transposed from feminine to become masculine or a feminine empowered respectively. Similarly, Newlands' implication of Medea's feminine empowerment also applies to C.A.E. Luschnig's privileging of Medea's femininity in her statement "Euripides, gives voice to those usually silenced: to slaves, women, foreigners, to those whose humanity has been diminished or denied" (Luschnig, 2007, p.xi). Furthermore, James Wade asserts that Medea is given "space to speak in the narrative" and that it "disrupts socio-political establishments" or "patriarchal legitimation" (Wade, 2004, pp.12,13), which extends the definition of Medea's feminine empowerment to also signify a contestation of the sovereignty of the masculine. Besides, Deborah Boedeker posits Medea as a feminine possessing agency in terms of having choice to oscillate between silences and having voice. In this regard, she argues that "she [Medea] speaks only when it is profitable for her to do so" (101). However, contrary to the arguments that endorsed Medea's agency through her act of speech, Butler opines the tenuousness of this agency in her comment "the woman in masquerade wishes for masculinity in order to engage in public discourse with men and as a man as part of a male homoerotic exchange" (71) that implies feminine agency in terms of act of speaking is a desire that can only be obtained by way of "masquerade", which is itself a specular signification and, hence, intelligible only by way of a signifying 'ruse'.

6. Medea speaks from the outside in the outside

My situating of Medea's act of speaking from the outside in the outside means Medea speaking in the outside space known as the public space—the *polis*—as a feminine who in turn is a marginalised subject who is "outside" a privileged position. This kind of association of gender with the outside and inside space is derived from Margaret Williamson's argument in her article "A Woman's Place in Euripides' *Medea*" (16-29) that asserts the *polis* (public space or the outside space) and *oikos* (inside space) as a space normally associated with the masculine and feminine respectively in the context of the ancient Greek culture.

Apart from her feminine subjection, Medea's foreign status further enforces her signification as an outsider; the Otherness of being Greek and masculine. In fact, this idea of the feminine speaking as a marginalised subject has already been explored extensively, for example, E.W. Ferna and B.Q. Bezirgan's article "Middle Eastern Muslim Women Speak", "Third World-Second World Sex: Women's Struggles and National Liberation: Third World Women Speak Out" by M. Davies, "Arms to Fight, Arms to Protect: Women Speak Out About Conflict" by Olivia Bennet, Jo. Bexley, Kitty Warnock, "Kwaio Women Speak: The Micropolitics of Autobiography in a Solomon Island Society" by RM Keesing, and "Brazilian Women Speak: Contemporary Life Stories" by Daphne Patai, amongst others.

In Euripides' text, Medea's gestures of speaking are mostly articulated in the outside space. However, within the *oikos* Medea's vocal noise can be construed as a form of speech that is textless. These varying vocal noises by Medea are mostly made intelligible by another, in particular the feminine. To illustrate, the Nurse describes Medea's noises as shouts (*Medea* line 21), wails (31), groans (106) and, similarly, the chorus of women

too recounts her shouts, wails and cries (131-135, 205-209).

Medea's act of speaking in the outside space of the *polis* can be categorized into five kinds of significations; act of speaking that is privileged, undermined, illustrating a paradox, privileging and undermining another. Instances of Medea's act of speaking that can be considered as privileged are Medea's speeches that indicate her as either having agency to speak or having this agency being recognised by another. For example, Medea's statement "Women of Corinth, I have come out of the house [...]" (214) and "I'd never have *talked to* or touched him with my hands" (370; emphasis added) show her as having agency to speak. Creon's speeches "I hear you've threatened" (287), "Soothing words you've spoken" (316), and Jason's statement "Of harsh words your tongue spews, woman" (525) demonstrate recognition of Medea's agency of speech that is recognised by another, in particular the masculine. These examples of Medea's performative rearticulation of the masculine code of behaviour—having agency of speaking in public—demonstrate a variation of the rearticulation of the normative; speaking agency possessed by the feminine that in turn is recognised by the masculine. Besides, Aigeus' request to Medea "Speak further" (748) and, similarly, Jason asking Medea "*let me hear* what new request you have to make me" (867-868; emphasis added) not only enforces the idea of Medea as a feminine having agency to speak that is recognised by the masculine, but can be construed as agency being accorded by the masculine. These variances of the performative rearticulation of the normative can be construed as not a failure of the repetition of the norms—the masculine as speaking subject—but instead agency that can only be accorded by the masculine who have agency to speak, and the feminine can only speak when they are asked to as recognised by the masculine. Hence, the failures or variances enumerated above can also be seen as not rapture but, conversely, an enforcement of the norms. Similarly, Medea's doubt "Perhaps, if God supports my words," (625) can be considered as implying a questioning of the tenacity of a feminine's speech and, thus, undermining the potency of the failure of the rearticulation of the normative as a rupture of the ancient Greek gendering culture. In other words, Medea doubting her own act of speech reaffirms the unintelligibility of the feminine's speech and, therefore, privileging the norm of masculine as agents of subjects that can speak. In addition, the subversion of the feminine's agency of speech can further be illustrated in the following statements by Creon and Jason that tell Medea to "Leave, go away at once; *no further talk*" (321; emphasis added), "You're wasting words" (325), and "your foolish words" (450). Even Medea herself marks her own speech as textless; a feminine without agency of words when she expresses "I moan [...]" (791).

Medea's gestures of speaking that signify a paradox show the conflation of both the enforcement and failure of the performative rearticulation of the norm. For instance, Medea's statement "Keep silent. A woman is generally full of fear" (263) illustrates a reiteration of a masculine act of speaking by a feminine whilst enforcing the feminine normative of keeping silent. Medea repeats this paradoxical gesture when she tells the chorus of women "From now on your speech is superfluous," (819) which marks the speech of another feminine as non-intelligible by way of her own transgressive act of speaking. In other words, Medea reinforces the feminine norms through silencing other feminine while she articulates the masculine act of speaking.

Another example of self-contradictory performative signification of Medea's speaking gesture is shown in her utterance "I cry aloud again" (1009; emphasis added). This act alludes to a feminine normative that is indicated in her previous statement "a woman is womanish and prone to tears" (928). Accordingly, this observation shows that two opposing forces of significations are operating simultaneously—the reiteration of the feminine normative of keeping silent by way of the transgression of this normative through Medea as a feminine who speaks.

Instances of the feminine privileging the masculine through her own speaking gesture can be seen in Medea's statement to the Messenger "The best possible word you would speak!" (1127) that implies Medea recognises the masculine's voice; and when she states to Jason "Tell me what you want" (1320) shows that she recognises the masculine's agency to speak. These examples can also be construed as demonstrating the two opposing reiteration of the normative; a speaking feminine—a contestation of the masculine codes of behaviour that signifies the masculine as speaking subjects; and the speaking feminine in itself constituting the masculine normative of the subject privileged to speak. On the contrary, an example of the feminine undermining the masculine can be seen only once in the text when Medea tells Jason "Your words have been uttered in vain" (1404), hence, marking the masculine's speech as unintelligible.

7. Conclusion

On the whole, the observations above show that Medea does speak throughout Euripides' tragedy. However, her act of speaking signifies both a state of being recognised and unintelligible at different points in the text. Viewed in this way, these varying states of recognition of her speech tend to raise several questions. Is Medea recognised as a speaking feminine who breaks the code of the ancient Greek normative feminine behaviour of remaining silent? Does Medea transcend her gender as a feminine and transposes into a masculine when she rearticulates the act of speaking? Or can it be inferred that Medea remains as a feminine who merely appropriates the masculine code of behaviour that is the gesture of speaking? Consequently, these questions also suggest the tenuousness of Medea's gendering by way of her act of speaking, which not only illustrates the specular attributes of Medea's gender in the text but also the notion of gender itself can be seen as demarcated by the text and, hence, a signification regulated by its discursivity. Indeed, Medea's gendering delimited within the text and, thus, a discursive construct.

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